

Here's To The Losers

By Stephen Thompson

Acknowledgements

For Jonah and Grace

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My odd, intermittent association with softball began when I was a diminutive yet giant-headed 7-year-old, built like a stop sign and about as gifted athletically. The year was 1979, or maybe 1980, and my best friend was a girl physically fit enough to rescue me from the beatings I'd receive for being best friends with a girl.

Still, in the cruel patriarchy of Orchard Hollow Elementary School's playground, she and the other girls were routinely denied use of the only baseball diamond, while the boys graciously allowed me the opportunity to be picked last and humiliated. As a budding feminist — and a fully formed self-righteous scold — I sensed an opportunity to level the playing field by forming and managing an all-girl team to play against the boys one fateful afternoon. It was just like tennis' famed battle of the sexes between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs, provided King had 1) lost; and 2) been managed by a diminutive 7-year-old with a giant head.

It's weird: Most of my childhood memories are based on some sort of hopelessness or humiliation, but putting that team together was a pretty cool thing to have done at 7, even if we did lose — narrowly — and I got smacked around by bullies pretty hard in the years that followed, at least occasionally as retribution. It was a true moral victory and, as such, it seemed important at the time.

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Cut to 1999. A little more than 20 years later, my commitment to social justice overshadowed by a desire for some sort of prelude to drinking with coworkers, I co-founded Team Onion Softball — a team that not only represented the humor newspaper and website, but also included many of its actual writers. The cause may have been less altruistic than encouraging 7-year-old girls to shatter the glass ceiling, but it was also far less likely to succeed. After all, this would not be some group of sporty ringers sponsored by The Onion as the paper's way of reaching out to Madison, Wisconsin's softball-playing community. These would be writers and editors, designers and interns, sales reps and momentary romantic companions. A reasonably skilled player would no doubt find his or her way onto the field every now and then, but, much of the time, my charges were playing for the rare opportunity to be exposed to natural light. I was the *coach*, and my own exercise regimen consisted of, once a year, lugging a giant box of Kentucky Fried Chicken from my car to my house in time for the Super Bowl.

Naturally, we made a point of signing up for the least competitive division in the city's slow-pitch coed recreational softball program — strictly beginners-only stuff. As coach, my tasks included teaching players such fundamentals as which direction to run in the

event that they hit a ball with the bat in a game situation, as well as occasionally offering words of encouragement such as “You’re supposed to stand there” and “Jesus H. Christ!” But at least I knew that our opponents would be similarly situated.

For Team Onion’s first-ever game, our prayer for even competition seemed to have been answered when we greeted our counterparts, The Hairballs, whose members were clients of a halfway house for developmentally disabled adults. But an hour later, The Hairballs had clobbered us handily, 10-3. It was a triumph of the human spirit, to say the least, dampened only by the fact that it was their human spirit which had triumphed over ours.

It would get worse. A few weeks later, we suited up against Bucky’s Sluggers, a team representing a local bar, and surrendered 25 runs before getting up to bat. Decent sports to the end, the Sluggers’ burly band of mustachioed sweatpants-wearers and pony-tailed women in cleats resorted to switch-hitting, gingerly trotting from base to base, and everything short of swinging the bat over their heads pile-driver-style in an effort to keep the game competitive. But the final score — in a game with a one-hour time limit — looked like a misprint: 40-0. We were shut out again the following week, though our fortunes had improved, as we gave up a mere 32 runs.

On our inaugural season went: After losing to The Hairballs and giving up 72 unanswered runs in two weeks, watching my team score in a subsequent 9-1 loss made me feel like Michael Jordan, Lance Armstrong, and John Elway rolled into one, albeit without any of the money, ability, adulation, or actual athletic victory.

After a while, I began to notice a pattern. As if there were thought balloons visible over opposing players’ heads, I could read their minds: “Hey, we’re getting off to a really good start!” “Huh, The Onion’s team isn’t very good.” “Wow, I can’t believe he didn’t catch that.” “Hey, this isn’t a team sanctioned by The Onion; these people actually *work* for The Onion.” Our lopsided losses generated a remarkable array of good-natured responses from our opponents, from laughter to derision and back around to laughter.

Amazingly, it all felt pretty good. These early losses were so resounding that no one weak link could be blamed: You don’t lose 40-0 because of one dropped fly ball; you lose 40-0 as one monumentally inept organization, through countless embarrassing miscues and impotent batting. No stakes, no scapegoats. We didn’t necessarily love the games in which our opponents seized on poor pitching by standing like statues and walking in run after run — when you’re down 15, that sort of bush-league lawyerball is about as exciting as skeeball with spectators — but we came to revel in the strangely life-affirming tiny victories. We felt great if we followed a brutal, pants-down spanking with a competitively played, dignity-salvaging loss. Losing by single digits was like winning the Super Bowl. The pessimists in our fan base had come to expect a parade of

blunderous flubbery every time an opponent came up to bat, but then we'd turn around and field a short grounder near the third-base line and throw it to first for the put-out — the Team Onion Softball equivalent of the Triple Crown in horse racing. It got better, because how could it not?

Our first season included a win both theoretical (the other team forfeited) and literal (Earth spun off its axis for an hour), and then it ended on a glorious and altogether unexpected high note: a hard-fought 9-4 victory over the hated Hairballs. Some might have looked at our rag-tag bunch of misfits and said, "Those [men and women] couldn't beat a [team] of [developmentally disabled halfway-house residents]." But they'd have been wrong, at least once.

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Sadly, having racked up their first-ever win, The Hairballs disbanded following the 1999 season, which left me scratching my head and trying to conjure up the profile of a softball team we might beat in 2000. After all, looking back on a forfeit- and fluke-padded 3-7 campaign, our fate seemed to rest on whether a given opponent was even theoretically capable of losing to us. We were in the lowest competitive division of slow-pitch coed recreational softball, and still the 2000 league lineup featured no teams representing burn wards, fat camps, science-fiction chat rooms, heads in jars, stand-up cardboard cutouts, or the skeletal remains of 19th-century dowagers. There was us, and there were teams seeded in the lowest division out of either a manager's false modesty or a team-wide desire to lay the spank down on teams that suck. I can only assume that they viewed games against us as perverse zoo exhibits or cruel pranks.

Now, some of you may be wondering, "So what does it mean to suck at softball? I get that they lost a lot." In many ways, it's hard to describe without using such vague terms as "oafish moronics" or "a giant creaky engine of haplessness." But imagine a bunch of movie critics in the field, with bases loaded, and an opposing batter swatting the ball to the shallow outfield. After reaching third, a base runner feels ambitious and tears toward home plate. An outfielder, sensing the call for desperate measures, hurls the ball toward home, missing the catcher by 20 feet and allowing the runner to score, at which point the runner at second takes off for third and the runner at first takes off for second. The catcher, having retrieved the ball, throws it to third, missing wildly and prompting the runner (who has safely advanced to third) to run home, in turn prompting the third baseman to scramble for the ball while the runner at second runs to third. It's kind of like that, which says nothing of the several times a ground ball has rolled past or under no fewer than three Onion players, the last of whom would topple helplessly to the earth, as if diving for a greased water balloon. At their worst, the games represented the inevitable train wreck that occurs when run-of-the-mill softball prowess meets confounding, dizzying ineptitude.

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Still, like the proverbial phoenix rising from the ashes — or the proverbial boxer who lulls his opponent into submission by getting pummeled about the head and midsection — Team Onion Softball started to produce faint glimmers of sweet mediocrity in its second season. If you had told me in April 2000 that we'd be outscored 32-4 in our first two games, I'd have brightened and asked, "Really? Four?" In games culminating in single-digit losses, we often reached levels of athletic competence that could truly be hailed as competent. Besides, to those with active imaginations, 11-4 is a nailbiter.

But for all our tiny specks of progress, the lowlights were punishing. Like a spider struggling to escape the urinal basin only to be washed back into its acrid abyss, we spent 2000 being flushed away by teams representing taverns, restaurants, a print shop, and, in a particular low point, a group of drunk, snaggle-toothed bikers who'd scored only 15 runs in six games that season. They beat us 19-7, which functioned as Exhibit A in the case for our status as the worst team in the league. With two games left in the season, we began to ponder the case for our status as the worst team in the history of the world.

Around this point, it became increasingly difficult to find new and inventively colorful ways to inform our friends, fans, and faraway coworkers of just how pitifully we'd performed the week before. As coach and co-captain, I'd write lengthy company-wide missives describing our games, but I began to see why sportscasters conjure up so many obscure synonyms for "won" and "lost." I suppose I could have just emailed the box score — e.g., "Pitcher's Pub 21, Onion 0" — but scores like that required greater descriptive power. "Pitcher's Pub ripped out our collective still-beating heart and showed it to us before we collectively died." "Wilson's Bar pounded us into gobbets of viscera." "Hee Haw's cut us up into little pieces, sealed us in garbage bags, and left us on the side of softball's figurative highway." "Sports Pub's players brought their 'A' game, a phenomenon exacerbated by the fact that we'd brought our 'C-minus' game — and their 'C-minus' game is better than our 'A' game. If this set-up were the foundation for a multiple-choice question on the SAT, the answer would be (D) Sports Pub 15, Onion 2." And so on.

In the 10 games we played in our sophomore season, we won a whopping one, and by forfeit, at that. (As I noted at the time, winning by forfeit is like going to a prostitute: Why settle for a hollow, unearned victory when you might one day achieve the same thing through years of false hope and degradation?) A season-ending 7-6 loss to the league's best team was hearteningly competitive, as was our riveting Mark McGwire/Sammy Sosa-style home-run race between a player with one home run and every other Team Onion player ever. But that final loss also served as a bitter reminder of what I always told my players: that standing tall in battle stood as their reward for the crushing, soul-

shrapnelizing inevitability of defeat. It took us only two seasons to learn that in Team Onion Softball, as in life, you can't win 'em all — or, you know, ever.

At the end of the 2000 season, I had to inform the Onion staff that we'd finished the season without a legitimate win, but I did soften the blow slightly by announcing that my then-wife was three months pregnant with what I assume was my first child. I closed the missive with these words: "Sports represents one of society's great metaphors, its battles recalling the do-or-die mentality and danger of war, the strategy and scheming of politics, the emotional purity of religion, and the loyalty and teamwork of family. I hope, when teaching my son or daughter about life's battles, that Team Onion Softball's 2000 season will serve as another great metaphor: As go our struggles and battles on the field, so goes the morbid parade of misery and humiliation that will greet our child as he or she plunges into the gaping void that is human existence in the new century."

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The 2001 season didn't start out a whole lot better, as five straight defeats extended Team Onion's losing streak to a whopping 15, a veritable Dynasty Of Decay stretching back to any accepted definition of the preceding millennium. Before the season's sixth game, against 4-1 league powerhouse Wilson's Bar, there existed little hope of breaking that streak outside of a sudden, Wilson's-wide Ebola outbreak. In addition to our 0-8 record against teams representing taverns, Wilson's Bar's four-game winning streak — during which they'd already pasted us, 14-3 — would be up against our epic losing streak, and, as everyone knows, when an unstoppable force meets a collapsible object, something is bound to give.

But on that fateful Friday night, it was Wilson's Bar. Us 7, Them 3.

To be honest, I'd always thought that, if Team Onion Softball were to shed its lovable-loser persona, it would have been through a steep decline in lovability. But, in a sense, we would part with both halves of that equation before the night was over. Until that point, the spirit of Team Onion Softball seemed to dictate not only good sportsmanship, but also the impulse to lose horribly. Were the two inexorably intertwined?

In sharp contrast to past games, in which Team Onion was clobbered and everyone had a good time filled with sportsmanship and inter-team camaraderie, we almost came to blows with Wilson's Bar midway through the sixth inning. Unbeknownst to us at the time, several Wilson's players were taking issue with Onion pitcher Nathan Rabin's tendency to chatter mindlessly at opposing base-runners and perceived his mutterings and occasional exclamations as taunting. While heading back to take the field at the bottom of the sixth, the opposing third-baseman pulled Nathan aside and said something along the lines of, "You keep talking to us like that and I'm gonna pop you

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one.” At this point, the game had been a tense battle, but I’d assumed that the tension had been the result of a slim Wilson’s 3-1 lead. Somehow, however, that odd threat conjured an emotion never before felt on Team Onion’s sidelines: pride.

Upon our first home run of the season, our sideline, bolstered by 15 or 20 family members and hangers-on, went nuts. A string of base hits followed, as Wilson’s grew ever more flustered, apparently intimidated by their own threat of physical violence against us, and a succession of cheap walks padded the score from 4-3 to 7-3. At the top of the seventh, the defensive hammer fell swiftly and decisively, and it was over. Just like that. Team Onion Softball had *literally* won.

In many high-pressure, high-profile situations in sports — NFL playoff games, the Olympics, and so on — the motto “Lose And Go Home” is a threat used as motivation. Lose, and the dream is over. But for us, “Lose And Go Home” was a weekly agenda, a motto, a way of life. What now?

At that time, a win felt like nothing short of a dynasty. Forever etched in my consciousness as the Miracle On Dirt, it felt like an unfathomable — nay, apocalyptic — moment in sports, akin to the time that one Olympic wrestler from Idaho or Wyoming beat the Russian guy who’d never lost. After one scintillating hour, our preseason dreams of a 3-7 record didn’t seem so farfetched.

But it didn’t take long to experience the downside of Team Onion’s newfound potency amid the dispiriting sideshow of threatened violence and self-righteous post-game hectoring. It sounds weird, but I’d always taken a measure of solace in losing big: No one is threatened by you when you’re on the thrashed end of a 21-0 thrashing. No matter how belligerent or enigmatic our players may have been, it’s hard to muster anger. But losing to The Onion is no laughing matter, and a 7-3 loss must have been terribly hard to stomach.

A few weeks later, I received a call from the league’s sports supervisor, Rita, informing us that the coach of the Wilson’s Bar team had contacted her to complain about Team Onion, noting that we were guilty of a minor rule violation (something about substitutions in the batting order) and accusing us of glowering and talking smack at Wilson’s players in the weeks following our confrontation. Rita explained to me nicely that the tension between the two teams was affecting Wilson’s Bar’s enjoyment of the season — no mean feat, given that the team had always exuded all the childlike glee of a biological-weapons disarmament unit. But I’d have felt a lot worse about their plight, had Rita not also passed along the coach’s explanation of the threat against Nathan: What the guy actually said was, “If you keep doing that, I’m gonna pop one up to you.”

Now it all made sense! He hadn't threatened to strike Nathan; he'd threatened to hit a high fly ball, which Nathan would then have had to catch, assuming the infield-fly rule wasn't in effect. A lot of pressure on Nathan, because a fly ball to the pitcher would, by definition, have hung in the air for some time. That's a threat with teeth! Had the half-dozen Onion players who heard the guy say, "I'm gonna pop you one," known that he'd really said, "I'm gonna pop one up to you," we could have continued the good-natured trash-talking with such devastating warnings as, "You'd better watch it, or I'm gonna bobble this grounder, allowing your base-runners to advance safely!" and "Back off, lest I stand at home plate like a statue as your pitcher lobs in perfect strikes!"

If I learned one lesson from Wilson's Bar — and it should be noted that we're talking about only one of the many Madison teams generously sponsored by the community-minded tavern of the same name — it's the danger of trash-talking while victory is theoretically possible. Losing generally renders the loser inherently inoffensive, but winning requires a graciousness to which we were unaccustomed. It became clear in an instant that losing to Team Onion Softball was like a scarlet "O" that can never be wiped away. Play the worst, and you might just end up losing to the worst. Wilson's Bar learned that lesson the hard way.

Our historic win soon ballooned into an astounding "three-peat" — *three wins in a row!* — though a handful of critics belittled our winning streak by noting that the next two victories took place at the expense of Option To Play, another halfway house. But this elitism is typical of those who sit on the sidelines as others defeat the developmentally disabled in sports. I, for one, have known humiliation well enough to appreciate life's hollow victories, and besides, one of those wins was a hard-fought 5-4 squeaker, won in extra innings. It's not as if, on the long and winding road from futility to mediocrity, we'd somehow careened past our destination.

Still, I'd come to miss the serenity that accompanies insultingly low expectations. We wound up finishing our third season 4-6, which is pretty impressive, when you consider that fully half of those wins came against teams with intact mental faculties. We even started to fall out of the habit of getting slaughtered in spectacular debacles — or, as they'd come to be known in Onion Softball parlance, "debaculars."

At that time, I remember thinking that we'd climbed about as high as we could without suffering the profound identity crisis that losers experience when they begin to find success in life. (See also: everyone who wrote for *The Onion* at the time.) Looking back, winning those four games felt a lot like a sports movie's lousy-team-wins-its-way-back-into-contention montage sequence — imagine the highlights being played out to the tune of "Takin' Care Of Business" — wherein a coach accustomed to disgrace watches his wacky misfits get their act together just in time to defeat their cocky rivals for the championship. In this case, there was no championship for *anyone* to win, we didn't

even finish the season with a winning record, and most of our *actual* rivals beat us decisively. But still. You could tell that something was up.

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Did I just suggest that “something was up”? Okay, early in our fourth season, that “something” turned out to be us continuing to suck. Six games in, I began to let my focus drift from finding ways to improve our 0-6 record — Step 1: Stop losing to the Madison Public Library — to railing against the league for its failure to crack down on performance-enhancing nutrients. Team Onion’s honest old-schoolers were dutifully filling our bodies with such wholesome building blocks as KFC, McDonald’s Bacon Egg & Cheese Biscuits, Marshmallow Peeps, and apple fritters the size of merry-go-rounds; why should we be forced to compete with those who get “juiced” for Friday-night games with sports drinks, daily multivitamins, green vegetables, and even the milk of the cow?

Going into the 2002 season, I knew nothing about the team that called itself Sports Pub, but I could think of two things I didn’t like about its name. Then, once I got a good look at its non-spheroid Murderer’s Row, I could see the signs of reckless teamwide consumption of vitamins, minerals, and complex carbohydrates. Batters who propel the ball long distances and run like the wind. Pitchers whose perfect arcs land precisely on the plate. Infielders who pick up ground balls and throw them to the appropriate baseman, who then catches the ball in his or her glove in time to put out the approaching runner.

My own offseason exercise regimen was highlighted by the time I bent down to pick up a penny in November 2001. But, through sheer pluck and practice, my contributions on offense had begun to elicit fewer uses of such adjectives as “impotent” and “nauseating.” The birth of my son the previous year, as well as a diet consisting mostly of convenience-store pudding pies, had helped me pack on an impressive 25 extra pounds; the resulting improvement in my stats backed up my theory that in softball, as in life, girth is power. Opponents — and, by “opponents,” I mean “teammates” — laughed at my trademark tomahawk swing, but I hit surprisingly effectively without the benefits of a sensible diet. (For the 2002 season, I hit a downright alarming .826 in 23 at-bats. Extrapolate those figures for a 162-game Major League Baseball season, and I’d have hit .826!)

Meanwhile, Sports Pub’s players looked as if they were going to beat us, and they did so twice, by an average of 11 runs, which doesn’t really qualify as poetic justice. However, those seeking a small moral victory should note that a quick visual check of Sports Pub’s urine samples revealed minimal viscosity, indicating a dangerously low grease index. But, in the interests of good sportsmanship, I opted to drop the matter altogether and figure that we were bound to get ’em next time — although by “em,” I

was referring to an as-yet-undetermined opponent and not Sports Pub, whom we would never actually get.

Fortunately, a few hardy souls weren't afraid to face their opponents on a level playing field, fueled solely by snack treats, bright-green soft drinks, and good old-fashioned heart. For every decisive loss to a team like Sports Pub, we enjoyed a narrow loss to a team like the Slugs — a bunch of tie-dye-clad good sports and all-around nice folks who shared with us a general lack of interest in “glory” or “heroics” or “winning” or “staving off humiliation.” These are the sort of constructive, friendly good sports you're taught not to be in gym class, and, on our way to 0-6, our loss to the Slugs felt heartwarming enough to have been lifted straight out of a Nora Ephron movie, albeit with far less attractive participants. After all, when losing to the Slugs, the sting of defeat was invariably salved by the soothing balm of knowing that the better human beings had won.

Still, in Week 7, our goals grew marginally loftier, as we stared icily across the infield at our bitter rivals from *Isthmus*, a Madison-based weekly newspaper catering to the city's coveted 49-64 demographic. As a softball power, *Isthmus* had been demolishing us with regularity, starting at a good-natured picnic bout (during which, in their first-ever game, they won 26-8) and continuing through a decisive 2001 sweep. My life up until Week 7 had been fraught with escapist pursuits — parenthood, marriage, the occasional minor narcotic — all designed to obscure a hole in my heart shaped like a softball victory against *Isthmus*. I'm hardly known for my Lombardi-esque passion for winning, but I wanted victory in this game the way other people want actual success in real life.

There's no easy way to say this, but here goes: Mission accomplished.

I can hear forks dropping around the world, but it's true: Onion 14, *Isthmus* 9. If I had to rank the greatest days of my life, I'd have to list the births of my assorted children and Team Onion Softball's defeat of *Isthmus*, not necessarily in that order.

In many ways, it would have made sense to disband the team right then and there: What more did we need? Why get greedy? As news of our historic win echoed across the land, I endeavored to whip up a sort of nationwide Team Onion Mania, even going so far as to write us a fight song. To the tune of “Hail To The Victors,” the fight song of the loathsome Michigan Wolverines, here's “Fight (Onion Softball)”:

Fight, Onion Softball!
Fight! Fight! Fight!
Onion Softball!
Fight! Fight! Fight!
Onion Softball!
Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!

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It didn't really take off, but our on-field good fortune continued for the remainder of the 2002 season, during which we clobbered the Slugs, exacted sweet revenge on the despicable Madison Public Library, and even, in a feat of cowboy ninja voodoo, managed to beat *Isthmus* again. Naturally, I couldn't help but feel strangely ambivalent about all that winning. Was it really better than the endless cavalcade of defeat that had preceded it? It's a lot harder to fall from grace when you already reside at the bottom of the barrel. In 2003, could comeuppance await?

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As both a softball player and a football fan, I always enjoy it when the sprinting and throwing of softball season gives way to the beer-hoisting and couch-moistening of football season. But it also makes me think a lot about the way these two noble sports vary. Sure, there are obvious differences — for example, softball is a sport I play, while football is a sport I merely stare at, slack-jawed, while wolfing Double Stuf Oreos — but some are subtler and more theoretical.

I've always felt that football is the greater sport but that softball is more lyrical; it entails more reflection, even (or perhaps especially) during the process of playing it. From my vantage point in centerfield, there's only an occasional burst of action, inspiration, desperation, heroism, or calamity to break up an otherwise soothing sensory experience of lush greenery and towering spotlights that pierce the night sky, drawing a swirling cloud of insect life to dance its skittish, suicidal dance, like Icarus soaring majestically before having his wings seared off by the sun. Between moments of athletic exertion, I have time to compose sentences that long in my head.

In football, the moments between plays are spent catching breath, detailing future formations, sweating the details, and recovering from the momentary injuries that will soon be overwhelmed by adrenaline. In softball, those in-between moments last long enough to leave time for rumination on life itself — and, appropriately, to become a sturdy metaphor for our very existence. Team Onion Softball's rocket ride to mediocrity meant a lot of things to a lot of people, but it actually inspired me to dream big for my young offspring: If Team Onion could go 4-6, couldn't little Jonah grow up to achieve success in life roughly 40 percent of the time, too?

Throughout my undistinguished athletic career, I've devoted virtually all of my energy to the pursuit of avoiding embarrassment. As a scrawny, 97-pound seventh-grader, I'd fantasized about transforming myself from the weakest kid in school to the second-weakest, and in 1985, I accomplished that glimmering goal with my defeat of 95-pound Chris Eitland in Greco-Roman wrestling (!) during gym class. I may have been a pitiful pantywaist, but at least I knew I wasn't the most ineffectual kid in the entire world. When you're 12, that counts for something.

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After a while, the 2003 season revealed that we stood a decent shot at whomping up on the Chris Eitlands of city-league softball. For several years, we'd been playing a similarly unimpressive team called ADS Mechanical, whose captain was blind and batted off a tee; he quickly proceeded to hit about .700 against us, walloping doubles and triples while we pantsed around like the clown show that we were. But in 2003, we beat ADS Mechanical twice by the same gaudy score — Us 18, Them 2 — which had once seemed as statistically unlikely as us winning at all, ever. (All hail Team Awesome, your heroes!)

Sure, we also took a barrel of drubbings and learned some hard lessons along the way. For example, while playing a team of credit counselors, we learned that credit counseling is a field which requires the services of many enormous burly men in sleeveless T-shirts. We learned, yet again, that 4 runs are fewer than 15. We learned that the “it” in the expression “leaving it all on the field” often referred to “our dignity.” We learned that all of our time spent in the service of trenchant satire didn't make watching Andrew Welyczko get walloped in the nutsack with a ground ball any less hilarious. (We even created a new box-score statistic for the occasion: “HJ,” for “Hit in Junk.”)

But when the season was over, we'd again boast of having scaled two-fifths of a very short mountain, finishing 4-6. For the most part, our play had become unembarrassing, even so-so in spots. Our defensive meltdowns had become more akin to crayons melting in the summer sun than gory, skull-pulverizing explosions. Which, in turn, meant that our goals were getting more ambitious — a 4-6 season will do that to a softball team. Suddenly, optimists were talking about 5-5. We literally started thinking, every time we stepped on the field, that a win was as likely as a loss. Consequently, a single foul-up, the kind that used to be so forgettably routine, held the potential to cost us a game on its own.

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Religion and athletics have been intertwined for as long as both have existed, so it comes as no surprise when athletes talk about God's place in the world of sport. The Almighty's name comes up constantly, from respectful prayers on behalf of an injured opponent to crass invocations of God's will as it pertains to contract negotiations, but the general rule is that Christian athletes believe God plays a role in their daily lives, which in turn extends to the sports they play.

Team Onion Softball is no different. By the beginning of the 2004 season — my last as coach and co-captain — I had long since come to the conclusion that the Lord harbored a fascination with our scrappy ball club, and that He hated us with a rage bordering on psychosis. That may seem unduly pessimistic, but think of the athletes God has blessed and then consider that, when they win, He's not just blessing their houses; He's

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choosing sides. Now, think about the teams God preferred to Team Onion Softball: They included taverns and libraries and print shops and rival newspapers and the elderly and gnarled, drunken bikers. God didn't necessarily love this sundry assortment of misfits and ne'er-do-wells with every shred of His divine grace. He just hated the living tarnation out of *us*.

Excluding forfeits and scrimmages, Team Onion Softball went 13-34 in its first five seasons. Were we 13-34 because we'd fielded an assortment of incompetent bunglers? Because most of us had spent our formative years indoors, playing Yars' Revenge and crying in front of the mirror, while our peers were outdoors, playing sports and conspiring to give us purple nuprles in the locker room? Were we really a sorry team because we stunk at sports?

I finally came to terms with our status as God's pincushion during the first game of the 2004 season, when my disastrously mishandled fly ball in centerfield — a blindfolded chimpanzee standing on a ladder could have done no worse — turned a one-run lead into a two-run loss to the Harmony Toss Ups. At that time, I'd spent five-plus seasons trotting out our team motto and recruitment slogan, "No Stakes, No Scapegoats," and I figured I'd seen it all: Squandered leads. Humiliating blowouts. Victories that rang hollow. Defeats that rang true. But until that exact moment, I'd never encountered a way to lose a team sport single-handedly. Had the game ended with my being engulfed and devoured by a swarm of hungry yellowjackets, it wouldn't have stung more bitterly.

But just as I was about to demote myself to our farm team — which consisted mostly of easily flustered asthmatic schoolgirls — Team Onion Softball commenced its long-threatened ascent into full-blown respectability. As the summer of 2004 rolled on, our record against taverns improved to a gaudy 2-16 when we bested the seemingly superior White House Sport Lounge. We exacted revenge against the Harmony Toss Ups, who reacted to their unfolding defeat with the sort of joylessly silent disbelief usually reserved for visits to war memorials. And, most staggeringly of all, we posted our first winning record: 5-3, with two games canceled due to a bizarre string of rainouts. (Speaking of God, I always saw His hand in rainouts, as if He were saying, "Hey, you guys really shouldn't be playing softball. Frankly, I'm sick of watching it.")

As wonderfully surreal as it was to win more games than we'd lost, there was something strangely alienating about my association with a team that could legitimately call itself a winner. I never once, not even for a second, rooted against my team. I always ran as hard as I possibly could, whether I was tearing toward first base or trying to locate the deep fly ball I'd just dropped in centerfield. I *wanted* to win but, once I did, I didn't know what to do with victory. Three and a half months after the last game of the 2004 season, I left my position as coach — and, with it, my actual job at The Onion. After all, what was left to accomplish?

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I've always loved the Olympics, especially when deep-voiced announcers gravely recount the hardships that have befallen athletes on their road to glory. Don't get me wrong: I'm as moved as anyone by the visual poetry of gymnasts prancing about while twirling a ribbon and holding a red ball. But the drama of the Olympic stage rings hollow without the stirring soft-focus tales of how those athletes got there. Throughout history, Olympic ball-prancers have endured all manner of oppression, whether at the hands of cruel Romanian gymnastics coaches or shift supervisors at Home Depot. Their heroic tales cry out to be told, because, without stories, sports are just games.

But, as Team Onion's contests grew more competitive, the stories behind them came to mean less. I returned to play in most of Team Onion's 2005 season, during which we (or should I say "they"?) finished 7-3 — with two losses by two runs or less. Looking at the shifting demographics of our team, the improvement made sense: Our men, once dominated by burrito-gobbling comedy writers, now consisted mostly of cannon-armed sales reps. Gone were the preening interns and book-reading girlfriends, who'd made way for recruits from a local women's fast-pitch team.

I moved away just before the 2006 season and never saw another Onion softball game. That year, Team Onion, if you could call it that, finished 10-0 (a record that, to word it delicately, was not consistent with the framers' intent) and then disbanded altogether. Anyone can overcome adversity, I guess, but you can't always overcome the pressure that comes with adversity's dissipation. The media had abandoned us — early games had been covered in such highfalutin news periodicals as *The New York Times* and the March 2002 issue of *Penthouse* — and the fans had mostly followed suit. People like to think of themselves as the sort of plucky dreamers who root for the underdog, so cheering on Team Onion in 2006 was bound to lose its allure.

Someday, when they lower my IKEA-brand casket into a shallow pit at the hobo cemetery, my children will grudgingly show up to say a few words. I hope they remember this story and understand that, while there are times when losing *isn't* okay — wars, elections, Green Bay Packers games — many other situations infuse losing with a certain nobility. I took great pride in never forfeiting a game: Losing 40-0 is vastly preferable, and I have proof.

There's nothing wrong with playing hard and winning, especially when the outcome accompanies real-world results. But I'll go to my grave insisting that playing hard and losing can mean more — provided that, once the game is over, you dust yourself off and walk away with a story worth telling.